

Good Summaries – The Five Criteria



1. **A good summary condenses (shortens) the original text.** While it should be long enough to include the most important information, a rule of thumb for a summary is that it should be one-fourth to one-third as long as the original text if that text is 1-3 pages. It will vary greatly, for example, if it is a summary of a novel, book, or other long pieces. The length also depends upon the purpose of the summary.
2. **A good summary includes only the most important information.** Ask the question: “Is this piece of information important for the reader to know about the original passage?” The summary writer will want to include enough information to serve the purpose of the summary.
3. **A good summary includes only what is in the passage.** A summary comes directly from the original text and does not include either other information the summary writer may know about the topic (background knowledge) nor any opinions the writer may have about the topic.
4. **A good summary is written in the summary writer’s own words.** The original text is not copied, but the ideas are translated (or paraphrased) into the writer’s own way of saying them. If a phrase or sentence can only be copied, it should be quoted. Using original words helps to condense the text.
5. **A good summary is well-written.** The writer follows the rules of writing (e.g., complete sentences, punctuation, capitalization, word usage, and organization). A summary is not a list like an outline.

The Conventions to Follow

- **Avoid using questions.** Questions are usually too indirect and less efficient in presenting information for a summary. They tend to make the summary longer rather than shorter.
- **Avoid first person.** Do not use “I” in a summary; the summary writer is not the author, and using “I” also leads to the use of background knowledge or opinion. When writing a summary of a narrative (story), use third person.
- **Avoid dialogue.** There may be times when dialogue is the best way to convey the original meaning of a text, but in general dialogue should not be used.
- **Begin the passage with information from the text.** Do not begin a summary with “This passage was about...” or “What I read was... .”